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ABSTRACT

The undergraduate course in agricultural ethics has been under development at Texas A&M University for four years. The course that has evolved is the result of discussion between the philosophy and agriculture departments. The course attempts to incorporate basic economic principles that affect agriculture as well as to tie these principles to various philosophical approaches. Basic writing and thinking skills also must be taught to some of the students. Four groups of students usually take the course: agricultural economics majors, agronomy majors, other agriculture majors, and liberal arts students. The course is an elective and students are usually registered voluntarily. The course starts with a reading of John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" as a lead-in to discussion of structural changes in agriculture from the family farm to large commercial farming and of the use and misuses of land. Other readings in both economics and philosophy are required. Classes are conducted by the Socratic discussion method, and the teacher attempts to respect all students' points of view, while challenging superficial answers. Students are required to keep journals, answer short essay questions, and write a paper analyzing an additional reading. Although the course does not reach the original goals of high-level philosophical discussion, it does provide an introductory philosophical discussion and served a neglected area in the agriculture curriculum. (KC)

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# TEACHING AGRICULTURAL ETHICS IN THE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS CURRICULUM

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# TEACHING AGRICULTURAL ETHICS IN THE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS CURRICULUM

**ABSTRACT:** The curriculum development process and student population for the agricultural ethics course at Texas A&M University are described, and the influence of these factors on course content and syllabus is clarified. Current course content is related to the teaching goals for the class that have evolved during the course's process of development. Reasonable expectations for such a course in the agricultural economics curriculum are indicated.

# TEACHING AGRICULTURAL ETHICS IN THE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS CURRICULUM

The undergraduate course in agricultural ethics has been under development at Texas A&M University for four years. The current syllabus of the course reflects two sets of teaching goals, one determined by the philosophical dimensions of the subject matter, and the second determined by its agricultural dimension. The evolution of the course has been shaped by the curriculum development process and by the educational needs of the current student population. The result is a course that aims to improve the reading, writing, and analytic abilities of students at the same time that it introduces them to the value dimension of issues in contemporary agriculture.

This paper provides a review of the forces that have shaped the course, a discussion of the current teaching goals and syllabus content, and a brief discussion of teaching methods for ethical issues. Particular emphasis will be given to the role of agricultural ethics in the agricultural economics curriculum.

## The Curriculum Development Process

The undergraduate course in agricultural ethics was originally conceived in a series of discussions between members of the Department of Philosophy and various faculty in the College of Agriculture, and most particularly with Dean of Agriculture, H.O. Kunkel. The idea was to provide a course in which philosophical issues of relevance to contemporary agriculture could be discussed with a high degree of philosophical sophistication. Beginning

with Rachel Carson's Silent Spring and continuing through Wendall Berry's The Unsettling of America, a series of authors had raised criticisms of modern agriculture, and of the land-grant involvement in agriculture particularly, that were based on ethical statements of agriculture's goals, purposes, and responsibilities. It was felt that these criticisms could not responsibly be ignored in the agriculture curriculum, yet there were no agriculture faculty with the disciplinary training and mission appropriate to a careful, sustained analysis of the issues raised by these critics.

The course was not, therefore, conceived at the outset as an agricultural economics course, but rather as a high level philosophy course directed prominently toward students in the College of Agriculture. Administrative considerations, however, militated against locating the course in the traditional offerings of the Department of Philosophy and Humanities. The result was a plan to hire a philosopher jointly between that department and the Department of Agricultural Economics, and to develop the course as an offering in agricultural economics.

As the planned course moved through the curriculum development process, the target enrollment for the course was expanded to include undergraduates from any program who wanted to learn about the goals and functions of agriculture. The course was, therefore, entered in the university curriculum as a cross listing between philosophy and agricultural economics. The course was called AGEC/PHIL 316 Agricultural Ethics after some discussion revealed that the content of the course would, at the outset,

remain obscure to many students (and their faculty advisors) no matter what name was chosen.

Although there are variations from one degree plan to another, the general pattern is that the course counts as either an agricultural economics elective or as a philosophy elective. Students majoring in either of the principal disciplines may take the course on this basis. Some students in other agricultural majors have a designated elective in agricultural economics, and, at last check, advisors were accepting AGEC 316 to satisfy this requirement. Many degree programs throughout the university require an elective course in the general areas of humanities, the social sciences, or the liberal arts. AGEC/PHIL 316 is being accepted under all three designations in one program or another, but this is not a unilateral policy. Students in liberal arts degree programs, for example, may apply the course as a humanities elective, but not as a social science elective.

The curriculum development process has influenced the content of the course in two ways. First, the general content of the course and the emphasis upon philosophical methods and concepts were established early on in the discussions that led to an agreement to develop the course for the agriculture curriculum. Second, the joint offering of the course in philosophy and agricultural economics has determined the way that students can receive credit for the course, and, hence, has been a major factor in determining which students elect to take the course. As the syllabus has evolved through its experimental stages, the needs of

this particular student population have influenced the selection of content and methods.

Student Needs

Ideally, students would enter an advanced undergraduate course in agricultural ethics with some background knowledge of agriculture, particularly the social, economic, and institutional aspects of agriculture, and with some exposure (through a "great books" program, perhaps) to the basic concepts of ethics and political philosophy. In point of fact, a majority of students registering for AGEC/PHIL 316 are lacking in one or both of these background areas, and a significant minority are deficient in the basic reading and writing skills that would be presumed for upper division work in the humanities. The challenge, then, is to make some progress in remedying deficiencies, while not sacrificing entirely the goal of engaging the students in critical, analytic thought on value issues.

There are four basic populations of students registering for AGEC/PHIL 316. The largest group is agricultural economics majors. Agronomy majors consistently form the next largest group. The other two groups are all other agriculture majors, including students from natural resource disciplines, and students from a variety of majors in the liberal arts. Among these four groups, it is not surprising that only agricultural economics majors have a sufficient knowledge of the economic forces that affect agriculture. For many of the rest, this course represents their greatest exposure to economic concepts for their entire college career

(although many agriculture students, and particularly agronomy students, are strongly encouraged to take AGEC 105 Introduction to Agricultural Economics).

Student needs are correlated to each of the four student populations. Agricultural economics students need a course that draws upon their more sophisticated understanding of the social and institutional forces shaping agriculture, and provides for explicit discussion of the ethical and philosophical values that are at stake in the contemporary scene. They are particularly interested in the impact of change and policy on people: producers and consumers. Other agriculture students also need this material, but also need some explicit discussion of economic concepts as they underlie and impinge upon changes in agricultural structure or production and distribution methods. Agronomy students have a particular interest in natural resource issues, and in the values that should govern resource use.

Liberal arts students need an introduction to the role of agriculture in contemporary society. They need to be taught why agricultural issues are of relevance and importance for all members of society. All students can benefit from the reading and writing emphasis of an agricultural ethics course, but agriculture students in particular may not get many other opportunities for close supervision of reading and writing skills.

Current Course Goals

Course goals closely reflect the student needs outlined above. The overarching course goal is to create a learning

environment in which a fairly diverse student population, with different needs, can find material and methods of relevance to their particular educational goals in registering for AGEC 316. Although an occasional student is "coerced" into taking the course by an advisor, most are strictly volunteer students, and, as such, have fairly well defined personal goals and expectations in mind when they enter the classroom.

Among agricultural economics majors, the course serves two main goals. First, it helps them relate their economic training more clearly to concrete issues within the framework of their experience. Some agricultural economics students find the standard curriculum in agricultural economics to be abstract. Discussion of farm management problems may seem remote to students who have never lived on or near farms, and do not expect to do so after graduation. The discussion of agricultural ethics can, therefore, introduce issues that are familiar to them through newspapers and television, and provide, for some students, an opportunity to test the relevance of their curriculum in economics.

A more important goal is the critical reflection on the philosophical assumptions that students, even at the undergraduate level, have associated with economic theory. Agricultural economics students enter the course with a wide variety of views about the nature of individual values, their relation to social goals, and about the strengths and weaknesses of economic markets in providing a mechanism for the amelioration of value conflicts or a de facto decision procedure for social goals. In many cases,

students make a fairly close identification between these philosophical interpretations of economic theory and the basic subject matter of economics itself. Thus one important contribution the course can make is to help students make a distinction between economics and the various political philosophies that can be applied to guide economic policy.

Some students in agriculture take the course as an agricultural economics elective, and in a few cases, perhaps, as a substitute for the basic introductory course in agricultural economics. Although it is virtually impossible to provide these students with the introduction to economic concepts that they really need in this course, the current course organization reflects cognizance of the fact that this may be all the economics some students get. Generally, the goal is to combine a fairly broad sampling agricultural economists writing on substantive issues in the reading list, and to augment that with philosophical readings, many from classic figures such as Mill and Malthus, that make important use of economic concepts.

More broadly, the course can serve students in much the same way that any advanced course in the humanities might: the improvement of reading and writing abilities. Humanities courses require reading of materials that are written for a very different audience than is the typical textbook. Students must develop a sensitivity to the authors goals and methods of presentation; they cannot simply assume that the readings were written "for them." This goal can be particularly served if students read materials written in very different time periods, utilizing a variety of

writing styles, and presupposing a variety of background assumptions.

Student writing in the humanities is also intended to serve a spectrum of goals. Most students will write letters and reports in their subsequent careers. Although any practice in the mechanics of writing will help students in this regard, essays written on topics of agricultural ethics are very different from the standard form of most business communications. Essays in ethics stress the students ability to make the presuppositions and the logical connections in their thinking explicit. As students gain practice in writing that takes nothing for granted, they learn to think more carefully, and they gain sensitivity to to the elements of their writing that may be responsible for misunderstanding and controversy by their audience. Finally, students also learn the value of a writing exercise in stimulating and guiding one's thought process.

Course Content

Since the course has existed as a regular part of the agricultural economics curriculum, the first item on the syllabus has been John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath. Students read the book in its entirety, and it provides a background for discussion of two key contemporary issues, the environmental impact of production practices and the change in farm structure, in its fictional treatment of agriculture during the 1930's. The novel also serves the goal of broadening the type of reading materials and the

method of presentation that students will be exposed to throughout the semester.

Fairly early in the semester, students are assigned a two to three week unit on classical philosophical approaches to ethics and political philosophy. Three theoretical approaches to value issues are outlined: utilitarianism, human rights theory, and social contract theory. Discussion of these philosophical methods for understanding questions of ethics stresses not only their conceptual distinctness, but also their elements of complementarity and compatibility.

The main body of the course consists in a sequence of "case studies." Some cases can be fairly narrowly defined in terms of events, policies or actions that have been associated with value controversies such as the mechanical tomato harvester, or the marketing of infant formula in the developing world. Other cases would more accurately be described as thematic issues that encompass many different points of philosophical controversy. Examples of thematic issues include changing farm structure, and population growth. Some case studies are chosen for their value as teaching vehicles. The discussion of animal welfare and animal rights, for example, creates an excellent context for students to critically evaluate just what they mean when they say that someone (human or not) has an right.

Although the precise content of the course varies somewhat from semester to semester, three general areas have been retained through every version. They are the impact of changing farm structure on the people involved in agricultural production, the

dilemmas of international agricultural development, and the environmental impacts of agricultural production. A fairly clear impression of course content for Spring 1986 can be obtained from the course readings included as Appendix A.

Methods

Students are expected to keep up with assigned readings and to come to class prepared to discuss them. Classes are almost always conducted in a "Socratic discussion" format. Class opens with the instructor posing questions to the students. Some questions probe the students conceptual understanding of readings, others lead students to express criticisms and support they have for the points of view being expressed in the readings. The aim of this approach is to bring students to an analysis of the readings and to an understanding of the perspectives and assumptions that underlie them through an exchange of ideas that takes place in the classroom.

Although the discussion method is hardly successful in every case, and even at best consumes a great deal of class time, it has several advantages for a class such as agricultural ethics. The most important is that it provides relatively neutral ground for the instructor to work from. For some reason, controversial issues in agriculture are potentially more explosive in the classroom than virtually any others. Even the deeply divisive issue of abortion is more readily and civilly acknowledged to have two (or more) sides than is the question of whether to save the family farm. There are, of course, deep running loyalties and

suspicions that pervade students' (and faculty) perception of these issues at work here, and part of the function of the course is to bring these loyalties to light and to clarify the basis of some long standing conflicts. As such it becomes imperative for an instructor not to become too strongly involved in either side.

A related virtue of Socratic discussion is that it virtually forces a teacher to argue both sides of an issue. Discussions are effective only when superficial answers to questions are challenged. A teacher who applies the method successfully becomes identified with the values of truth, clarity, and logical rigor, rather than with partisan causes. There is nothing wrong with teaching students to respect truth, clarity, and logical rigor, and, indeed, the discussion method places the instructor in a position of serving as a role model for the underlying goals that the course is intended to serve.

Finally, it is, of course, essential that no student in such a course feel that a deeply held view is being dismissed unfairly. This is not to say that all answers ought to be tolerated; it is appropriate to press students to articulate the values and reasoning that they have applied to arrive at their opinions. Nevertheless, students will not learn if they do not feel that their ideas will be taken seriously, and asking a student to expand or articulate more fully the implications of a view is a good way to show respect for a student without necessarily endorsing the student's opinion on matters.

The discussion method is also followed up in writing assignments. Students do three types of writing for AGEC/PHIL 316.

Students write "journals" that are a mix of homework analysis of readings and personal reaction to course material. The instructor makes comments on these entries, but grades for journals are based on a contract system whereby a certain number of entries are required for each grade. The same basic format of short essays on readings and topics is followed up in essay exams for the course. By the time that students take their first exam, they have had several opportunities to see the type of comments and suggestions that are made on journal entries, and, thus, have had exposure to the conceptual and logical criteria that are applied to the evaluation of essay exams. Finally, students write a systematic critical essay on a work that they read outside of class. Here students are expected to apply analytic skills developed throughout the semester to a sustained, book length discussion of an issue relevant to the issues of the course. These long (5-7 page) review essays should be highly finished products that reflect the student's best effort at writing and conceptual analysis.

## Conclusion

The current version of AGEC/PHIL 316 Agricultural Ethics probably falls short of the lofty goals that had originally been projected for it. The need to bring students up to speed on background areas of philosophy and agriculture limits the level of discussion on agricultural issues that were originally intended to be the primary subject matter of the course. Students do, however, derive some sense of how philosophical concepts interact with and inform perspectives on agricultural issues. Furthermore, the

course provides a vehicle for introducing the problems of contemporary agriculture to a student population that would not typically take a course in agriculture. Finally, the broad educational goals of reading, writing, and logical ability are served in thinking philosophically about issues in agriculture.

Although the process of development for such a course would differ from one university to another, it is probably essential that such a course be compatible with designated or area elective requirements of at least some undergraduate degree plans. A course intended to fulfill humanities or social science requirements will, therefore, be likely to attract students with a broad variety of backgrounds and educational needs. In any case, it is unlikely that the dearth of students with background in philosophy and agriculture is a problem unique to Texas A&M. As such instructors in such courses should be prepared to devote a substantial effort to background education in practices and problems of agriculture, as well as in basic philosophical concepts.

Would a student be better off simply to take one standard course in agriculture, such as an introductory course in agricultural economics, or a course in food systems, and a standard course in political philosophy or ethics? In one sense, the answer is, yes. A student would learn more about agriculture and about philosophy by taking two such courses. There is no good reason to think that the average undergraduate would draw connections between these two sets of subject matter, however. Furthermore, traditional course offerings would not typically address the underlying philosophical issues that are at stake in many

discussions of contemporary agriculture. It seems clearly relevant to the research and teaching mission of land-grant universities to examine the philosophical issues, and to prepare graduates by helping them develop conceptual and logical skills as they are applied to issues that will, in many cases, have significant impact on their subsequent careers.

As such, the original motivation for a course in agricultural ethics would seem to be justified, although it may be unrealistic to expect a high level philosophical discussion at the undergraduate level. In providing an introductory philosophical discussion, however, the course goes some distance in servicing a neglected area in the agriculture curriculum.

## APPENDIX A

Table 1: Students in AGEC 316, 1982-86

| | Jan 86 | Sep 85 | Jan 85 | Sep 84 | Other | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AGEC Majors | 14/34% | 21/40% | 17/50% | 14/36% | 24/80% | 90/46% |
| AGRO Majors | 8/19% | 11/21% | 6/18% | 14/36% | 0/0% | 39/20% |
| Other Ag Col. | 13/32% | 5/9% | 8/24% | 8/21% | 4/13% | 38/19% |
| Non Ag Col. | 6/15% | 16/30% | 3/8% | 3/7% | 2/7% | 30/15% |
| TOTALS | 41/100% | 53/100% | 34/100% | 39/100% | 30/100% | 197/100% |